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Albania: Officials Crack Down On Terror Suspects

By Alban Bala

Albanian authorities have seized control of a twin-tower construction project in central Tirana after the government confirmed the project was being used to launder financial activities for the Al-Qaeda terrorist network. Alban Bala reports from Tirana on the government investigation.

Tirana, 25 January 2002 (RFE/RL) -- Since the collapse of communist rule in Albania a decade ago, numerous businesses, charities, and religious groups from the Muslim world have set up operations in Albania, where some 70 to 80 percent of the population is of Islamic heritage.

As the international war on terrorism unfolds, a recent government crackdown in Albania indicates that some of those businesses may have links to the Al-Qaeda terror network. A project to construct 15-story twin towers in central Tirana recently came under suspicion when one of the project's owners was found to have links to Al-Qaeda.

Ardian Visha, a spokesman for the Albanian Prosecutor-General's Office, says a central figure in the case is Yassin Kadi, a Saudi construction mogul who is the co-owner of the "twin towers" project. The spokesman says Kadi is suspected of laundering some \$10 million in Albania for the Al-Qaeda network. The government recently seized control of the site.

"In both buildings, a Saudi Arabian citizen named Yassin Kadi turned out to be the co-owner, contractor and customer [the one who ordered the buildings]. The Finance Ministry has charged him with money laundering, and he is suspected of having financed terrorist members of the Al-Qaeda organization," Visha says. "We have filed a request with the Tirana courts to temporarily confiscate this property and freeze any bank accounts this individual has in Albania."

The Albanian government has long pledged to clamp down on undesirable foreigners and their financial dealings. But until now the authorities have strongly denied that terrorist networks were present in Albania. The twin towers case is the first such admission by government officials that Al-Qaeda has penetrated Albania.

But despite having a suspect, prosecutors do not have their man -- Kadi's whereabouts are unknown, and Albanian officials concede he may have already left Albania.

It is not the first time Kadi's name has surfaced in relation to international terrorism. Kadi, who co-owns the Karavan Construction company and heads the Saudi-based Muwafaq charity foundation, is on the 12 October U.S. government list of individuals and organizations suspected of having terrorist links.

Prime Minister Ilir Meta told the Albanian parliament this week that over the past month, five people have been expelled from the country for threatening Albania's relations with other countries. He said an additional 223 foreigners have been asked to leave for holding invalid residency permits.

Meta also said his government has frozen the bank accounts and property of Kadi and several Arab companies. Authorities have singled out several foreign NGOs and companies -- mainly engaged in religious activities -- as under suspicion for illegal operations. Anti-money laundering teams are pursuing nine cases and say further investigations are underway. Meta said: "We identified the financial entities active in our country that are financially linked to the Al-Qaeda network. This action continues in cooperation with the Prosecutor-General's Office."

Shkelqim Cani is the governor of the State Bank of Albania, the country's central bank. Cani says that although the frozen bank accounts are in two particular banks, he suspects several more banks may be benefiting from servicing terrorists' accounts and transactions.

He says his office cannot measure the dimensions of the phenomenon, but adds that the Finance Ministry is legally obliged to do it: "The first point has to do with the same answer, which is: the Ministry of Finance is responsible for [identification of money laundering, transactions, and accounts]. There are not two banks that have benefited -- several have."

In addition to their possible terrorist ties, the twin towers -- which are being built across the street from Meta's office -- are considered an architectural eyesore as well. Maks Velo is a well-known architect, painter, and author. He says the twin towers have destroyed both the architecture and the ethics of law in Tirana: "It seems to me that Al-Qaeda stabbed us twice, in the body and in the head of the Albanian capital. I am convinced that these [two buildings] should be razed. It can't be predicted how much damage they will cause over time, because the result is going to be our becoming accustomed to the destruction of public places. I am confident that the economic damage is insignificant. Surely, the prime minister, the minister of construction, those who made such things happen, the mayor, the chief architect, and the municipal territory regulation council, are to be blamed."

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